

Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism: IR's "reflexive turn" – and beyond

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Abstract

The notion of "reflexivity" has been so intimately tied to the critique of Positivism and Empiricism in IR that the emergence of post-Positivism has naturally produced the anticipation of a "reflexive turn" in IR theory. Three decades after the launch of the post-positivist critique, however, reflexive IR has failed to impose itself as either a clear or serious contender to mainstream scholarship. Reasons for this failure include the proliferation of different understandings of "reflexivity" in IR theory that entail significantly different projects and concerns for IR scholarship; the equation of "reflexive theory" with "critical" and "emancipatory theory" and the consequent confusion of ethical/normative issues with strictly epistemic/theoretical ones; and the refusal to consider reflexive IR as a "research programme" concerned with empirical knowledge, not just meta-explanation. The development of reflexivity in IR theory as a sustainable cognitive and praxeological effort is nonetheless possible – and still needed. This paper suggests what taking the "reflexive turn" would really entail for IR.

Introduction:

In his 1989 article on the 'Third Debate' in International Relations (IR), Yosef Lapid (1989:249-50) noted, after Mervyn Frost (1986:11), that '[f]or many years the international relations discipline ha[d] had the dubious honour of being among the least self-reflexive of the Western social sciences.' This diagnosis was shared by many scholars who thought it necessary to start reflecting on the epistemic and theoretical premises that subtended the discipline's predominant narratives on world politics. The critique of Positivist (American) IR scholarship has therefore naturally produced the anticipation of a 'reflexive turn' (Neufeld 1991) in IR, and in the early 1990s the view was that 'the prospects for the development of theoretically reflexive international relations theory [were] real and significant, while the need for such theory [was] urgent' (Neufeld 1991:2).

With the emergence and development of a sustained and coherent meta-theoretical critique of Positivist IR, "reflexivity" has, indeed, gained a substantive visibility in IR debates and literature ((Cox 1996[1981], 1996[1985]; Hoffman 1987; Keohane 1988; Lapid 1989; Linklater 1992; Neufeld 1993, 1995; Jackson 2011) and developed into a more or less explicit core theme of post- or anti-Positivist IR (Fierke 2002; Guillaume 2002; Smith 2002, 2004; Hendershot 2004; Agnew 2007), more

specifically within Critical (Cox 1996[1981], 1996[1985]; Linklater 1992; Cutler 1999), Constructivist (Hopf 1998; Wendt 1999; Guzzini 2000, 2005; Lezaun 2002; Drulák 2006; Pouliot 2007; Steele 2007c; Lynch 2008), Feminist (Carver, Zalewski, Kinsella and Carpenter 2003; Tickner 2005, 2006; Ackerly and True 2008), and Pragmatist (Widmaier 2004) approaches. Although reflexivity has been mainly addressed from a theoretical, meta-theoretical or specifically epistemic-normative perspective, recent “reflexive scholarship” has also been increasingly concerned with the importance and practical meaning of “reflexivity” for *empirical* IR research (Guzzini 2005; Ackerly and True 2008; Lynch 2008; Hamati-Ataya 2011), which suggests that there is some belief among post-Positivist IR scholars that reflexivity can lead to an alternative research program capable of producing a different knowledge of world politics, and also of generating cognitive growth in the traditional sense of the term.

While a review of the literature points to the significance the notion of reflexivity has acquired in contemporary (non-mainstream) IR scholarship, it also reveals that, not unlike other central thematics of “third debate” literature, the “reflexive turn” has failed to translate into a clear and appealing alternative to Positivism, and therefore remains located at the margins of the margins of the discipline. Not only does “reflexive scholarship” seem to be incapable of moving beyond the explication of what the “turn” entails, it also seems to have lost the momentum and impetus of the “turn” itself, with the proliferation of different perspectives on reflexivity that only *appear* to converge into a common epistemic, normative, or empirical project. As a result, reflexivity finds itself diffused into a general dissident literature that has failed to make a decisive impact on the discipline, thereby giving the impression that the “turn” is either still on-going, or not really worth taking at all. This current state of affairs only serves to reinforce the old scepticism about the relevance of post-Positivist IR to empirical research (Keohane 1988).

The paradox, then, is that on the one hand, reflexivity has undeniably been developing in the work of specific IR scholars, for whom the notion still makes sense both as a serious epistemic stance, and as a long-term academic project, but on the other, has failed to produce the kind of cognitive impact that is expected or hoped for by its main proponents. From the perspective of “reflexive scholarship,” the effort to assess the output of the “reflexive turn” in IR is worth making at this particular point

in the history of the discipline. This paper attempts to identify at least some of the problems and obstacles that have prevented it from developing into a sustained research program or “paradigm” in the general disciplinary sense of the term¹. Before doing so, it is important to contextualize the meaning of the “reflexive turn” in IR by identifying the general pattern of reflexive scholarship across the social sciences.

Apart from the specific context that characterizes IR as a socio-historically defined field of cognitive production, there is nothing unique about the intellectual emergence of “reflexivity” in its literature. As was the case in other social sciences, “reflexivity” appeared at a moment when Positivism’s epistemic premises were challenged by different types of historicist analyses of knowledge. The main targets of the “reflexive critique” are Positivism’s adherence to “truth as correspondence,” its understanding of knowledge as “representation,” and its separation of subject and object, and of facts and values. Against these core Positivist epistemic stances, the “reflexive turn” was meant to signify IR’s awareness of the historicity of knowledge, and of the inherently normative or ideological nature of IR’s underlying theoretical premises, modes of theorizing, and scholarly ethos. Converging with Critical Theory’s commitment to adopt a ‘perspective on perspectives’ (Cox 1996[1981]), reflexive IR scholarship naturally endeavoured to re-assess the foundations of theory and therefore delved into meta-theory as a higher order of discourse that was necessary for problematising and deconstructing the choices made at the theoretical level of inquiry (Neufeld 1993, 1995). Converging with Constructivism’s commitment to reveal the connections between representations of social reality and the social production of knowledge, it naturally delved into the sociology of knowledge as a way of making explicit and understanding the social conditions for the production of validity and meaning within IR (Guzzini 2000, 2005; Lezaun 2002).

Reflexivity similarly imposed itself in other social sciences that underwent similar critiques of Positivism, such as Sociology (Gouldner 1970, 1973; Giddens

¹ The paper adopts an internalist approach, focusing on the community of “reflexive” scholars and the body of literature that promotes “reflexivity,” either implicitly or explicitly, and does not touch upon the external obstacles to the development of the reflexive project within IR. These are more generally related to the constraints imposed by the discipline’s *doxa*, which continues to favour Positivism, and as such, undermines the development of a reflexive “disposition” among IR scholars, let alone the promotion of the meaning and relevance of reflexivity for IR scholarship. For a more sociological and reflexive understanding of how reflexivity itself is located within IR, see Hamati-Ataya (2011b).

1984; Bourdieu 1990; 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and Anthropology/Ethnography (Garfinkel 1967; Briggs 1970; Scholte 1974; Belmonte 1979; Sangren 1992[1988], 2007). It was also the subject of an important debate in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK), which was itself the product of a “constructionist turn” in the Sociology of Science (Bloor 1976; Barnes 1977; Gruenberg 1978; Woolgar 1988a, 1988b, 1993[1988]; Ashmore 1989; Doran 1989). In fact, IR has a lot to learn from the discussions on reflexivity that preoccupied SSKers in the 1980s, and from SSK’s own “reflexive turn,” which led to the development of creative modes of writing informed by critical ethnography and discourse analysis (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984; Mulkay 1984, 1986; Woolgar 1988b; Ashmore 1989), but which eventually led to the extinction of the *problematique* of reflexivity and its abandonment in favour of the more pressing challenges of *empirical* knowledge.

A review of IR reflexive literature points to the likelihood of seeing IR reproduce just this pattern: after a somewhat sustained, albeit disciplinarily marginal, concern for and dedication to reflexivity, IR scholars might end up relegating reflexive scholarship to the abstract realm of meta-theory, with no real translation of this fundamentally different way of theorizing into the realm of empirical knowledge. This paper will therefore attempt to identify these obstacles that may prevent reflexive IR from efficiently producing the kind of reflexive project that establishes reflexivity as a sustainable alternative in the study of world politics, thereby also highlighting IR’s potential in leading the revival and development of reflexivity in other social sciences where the debate has ended inconclusively. The “reflexive turn,” then, is here assessed according to an optimal, rather than a minimal, definition of what an academic “turn” is expected to achieve, that is, not merely ‘some sort of cognitive interruption within a research tradition,’ or a mere ‘turn away’ from its alternatives (Nolan 2007) – Positivism in this case – but a real *move toward* a properly new, stand-alone tradition defining an independent epistemic-praxical commitment for IR scholarship.

“Reflexivity,” What?

A reader unfamiliar with post-Positivist IR theory or with the intellectual and praxical concerns of scholars evolving at its margins will find it difficult to make sense of the

IR literature dealing with the oft-used but nonetheless tricky concept of “reflexivity.” Even a scholar who has spent some time working on this concept will have some trouble navigating within this literature, a review of which is likely to identify at least five important reasons why “reflexivity” is so widely diffused in post-Positivist IR, but so confusing to both the initiated and the uninitiated.

The first problem that faces a reader of “reflexive” scholarship is terminological ambiguity, as a quick review of the literature is likely to stumble upon a substantially large range of variations on the terms “(self-)reflection” and “(self-)reflexion.”² An obscure combination of these may even be found in one single text, such as in Ackerly and True (2008), who refer to ‘reflexivity’, ‘self-reflexivity’ and ‘self-reflection’ all at once, without explaining the differences among these terms. It seems, in fact, that these are so obviously inscribed in everyday, ordinary language that their various authors rarely feel the need to define them, even when “reflexivity” – or another variant of it – constitutes a central theme of their inquiry and argument. One may therefore argue – perhaps in a Positivist, Durkheimian or Baconian way – that the lack of distance from ordinary language contributes to the large palette of terminological uses, which is itself explained by the dual meaning the term “reflect” has in the English language, since it defines both the *passive* act of manifesting something or bouncing something off a surface *and* the *active* act of thinking about – reflecting on – something. This, in turn, explains why “reflective” and “reflexive” appear to refer at times to operations that are independent of the subject of knowledge, but at others to operations that are performed by the subject herself. It

² For example: ‘reflective’ (Hoffman 1987; Keohane 1988; Adler and Haas 1992; Linklater 1992); ‘self-reflective’ (Hoffman 1987; Hopf 1998; Steele 2007c; Ackerly and True 2008); ‘reflexive’ (Neufeld 1993, 1995; Cutler 1999; Guzzini 2000, 2005; Rasmussen 2001; Fierke 2002; Tickner 2006; Pouliot 2007; Steele 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Tickner and Tsygankov 2008; Hamati-Ataya 2010, 2011a); ‘reflexivity’ (Lapid 1989; Neufeld 1993, 1995; Hopf 1998; Cutler 1999; Guzzini 2000, 2005; Guillaume 2002; Fierke 2002; Widmaier 2004; Hendershot 2004; Tickner 2005; Pouliot 2007; Steele 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Ackerly and True 2008; Lynch 2008; Tickner and Tsygankov 2008; Hamati-Ataya 2010, 2011a); ‘self-reflexivity’ (Lapid 1989; Carver, Zalewski, Kinsella, Carpenter 2003; Sterling-Folker and Shinko 2005; Ackerly and True 2008); ‘reflectivist’/‘reflectivism’ (Adler 1997; Patomäki and Wight 2000; Smith 2002); ‘reflexivist’/‘reflexivism’ (Hamati-Ataya 2011a); ‘self-reflection’ (Hoffman 1987; Smith 2004; Steele 2007c; Ish-Shalom 2008; Ackerly and True 2008); ‘self-consciously reflective’ (Tickner and Tsygankov 2008); ‘self-consciously reflexive’ (Shani 2008).

also explains why some scholars feel no need to add the prefix “self-” to signify the self-referential nature of reflexivity, which they view as embedded in the notion itself.

These differences are also “reflected” in the fact that the terms “reflective” or “reflexive” are used to qualify a wide variety of “things,” which adds a confusion as to what a “reflexive ontology” is supposed to look like or what distinguishes the ontological concerns of “reflexive scholarship” from those of other academic traditions.³ That the term “reflexive/reflective” can refer to *subjects* as much as to *products* of knowledge, and to *mechanisms* as much as to *subjects* of actions makes it more difficult to identify the empirical realm of reflexivity. Sometimes, a significant disjunction between ‘reflexive’ and ‘reflexivity,’ as in Fierke (2002), where ‘reflexivity’ seems to refer to scholarship, whereas ‘reflexive’ refers to actors, illustrates the fact that these terms are often used with no consistent, or consciously chosen, underlying epistemic/ontological frame of reference.

More important perhaps is the fact that “reflexivity” itself is subject to interesting variations that locate it within different, and often *separated*, realms of inquiry. Reflexivity is thus often used to characterize an ontological dimension of social practice – as in the ‘reflexivity of the self and society’ (Hopf 1998) – but one is equally likely to read about ‘epistemological reflexivity’ (Widmaier 2004), ‘theoretical reflexivity’ (Neufeld 1991; Hendershot 2004), or ‘ethical reflexivity’ (Lynch 2008). This indicates that there are different “reflexive” traditions involved (see Marcus 1998), but often not consciously identified with respect to one another. One should not, in principle, be surprised to find that reflexivity can be a characteristic of epistemic, ontological, theoretical, *and* deontological standards and frames of reference for IR scholarship. In fact, one of the arguments of this paper is that the “reflexive turn” indeed *should* simultaneously impact all these levels/dimensions of scholarly inquiry, for it otherwise would not lead to a coherent

³ For example, ‘reflective reason’ (Hoffman 1987); ‘reflective approaches’ (as opposed to ‘rationalistic’ ones – Keohane 1988, and following Keohane, Adler and Haas 1992), but also ‘reflectivist approaches’ (Adler 1997); ‘reflective analysis’ (Linklater 1992); ‘reflective procedures’ (Linklater 1992); ‘self-reflective critical inquiry’ (Hopf 1998); ‘reflexive modernity’ (Guzzini 2000; Rasmussen 2001); ‘reflexive praxeology’ (Rasmussen 2001); ‘reflexive security’ (Rasmussen 2001); ‘reflexive loops’ (Guzzini 2005); ‘reflexive understanding’ (Tickner 2006); ‘reflexive discourse’ (Steele 2007a); ‘reflexive monitoring of actions’ (Steele 2007b); ‘reflexive realism’ (Steele 2007c); ‘reflexive theorists’ (Steele 2007c).

and independent tradition as Positivism clearly is. But the problem is that the relationship among these different dimensions has not yet been clearly identified or spelled out, at least not in an explicit and rigorous way.

Related to this point is the fact that “reflexive scholarship” in IR is inspired by a substantial variety of disciplinary and intellectual traditions in philosophy and the social sciences, that IR audiences are not necessarily familiar with. While Frankfurt School scholarship will likely inform the accounts of Critical IR Theorists (Hoffman 1987, Linklater 1992, Neufeld 1993), Feminist, Constructivists and other post-Positivist IR scholars freely refer to Frankfurt-style hermeneutics (Tickner 2005, Lynch 2008), or to the works of Pierre Bourdieu (Pouliot 2007, Eagleton-Pierce 2009, Hamati-Ataya 2010, Leander 2002), Anthony Giddens (Steele 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), Ulrich Beck (Rasmussen 2001), or Roy Bhaskar (Patomäki and Wight 2000). And one can also find combinations of two or more of these traditions within the same IR texts dealing with reflexivity (e.g., Guzzini 2000, 2005). Given that authors like Bourdieu or Bhaskar are themselves interpreted differently by IR scholars, the reference to a common theoretical genealogy for the concept of reflexivity does not guarantee better understanding or communicability across these interpretations⁴.

Finally, it is necessary to point to a more general problem that perhaps explains all of the above-mentioned observations. What seems to underlie the great variety of uses of the term/conception of reflexivity in IR scholarship is the fact that reflexivity is either *generically* and *minimally* construed as a form of *self-awareness* of one’s own scholarly “perspective,” or conceptualized in a more *maximalist* way as a methodological *self-critique* operating through an *epistemic* or *theoretical* “bending

⁴ Paradoxically, the more sophisticated IR scholars’ meta-theoretical approaches to reflexivity are, the greater the degree of contention over their interpretations of these different authors. A good example is provided by a comparison of Patrick Thaddeus Jackson’s (2011) and Colin Wight’s (2006) analyses of Bourdieu’s sociology, which are themselves based on a different categorisation of epistemic-ontological claims. Whereas Wight finds Bourdieusian ontology to be akin to Critical Realism, Jackson identifies reflexivity (including Bourdieu’s) as a ‘monist transfactualism,’ that is opposed to Critical Realism as a ‘dualist transfactualism.’ These important differences undoubtedly complicate things for IR’s general audience, which needs to be able to make sense of the whole meta-theoretical literature – and make some clear choices vis-à-vis it – before it can assess what “reflexivity” means and does in IR theory and research.

back” of one’s thought⁵. These differences can be assessed through a review of recent autobiographical/autoethnographic works in IR (Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Dauphinee 2007, 2010; Doty 2004, 2010; Inayatullah 2011; Löwenheim 2010). These appear to be a uniform manifestation of “reflexive scholarship,” but in fact differ significantly from one another, depending on whether they are informed by Post-Colonial, Feminist, or Constructivist IR, and whether they engage the “critical ethnographic” turn that is at the origin of a very diverse range of scholarship within autoethnography itself (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Not only does autoethnography mean different things for the IR scholars who have started developing it⁶, the kind of reflexivity that is manifested or “performed” in autobiographical/autoethnographic accounts is fundamentally different from what a Bourdieusian, Giddensian, or Critical-Theoretical reflexivity entails in epistemic and ontological terms (see Neumann 2010). While this point cannot be fully addressed within the limits of this paper, it is worth suggesting that proponents of reflexivity in IR seriously reflect on these differences, for the simple fact that taken in its *minimalist* form, reflexivity as *self-awareness* is unlikely to establish a solid *post-Positivist* alternative in the discipline. One should indeed remember that Behavioralism itself was, in this *minimalist* sense, the result of a properly critical and “reflexive” attitude vis-à-vis “bias” in research,

⁵ In this sense, it is not clear that “reflexivity” can practically be identified as a single conceptual epistemic-ontological category of IR scholarship, as Jackson does when he classifies all ‘reflexivists’ as ‘monist transfactualists’ and then expects them to offer a coherent ‘monist transfactualist’ account of world politics. The latter expectation, in other words, is reasonable only for some, rather than all, ‘reflexivists’ identified by Jackson, which in this paper corresponds to a “maximalist” understanding of reflexivity. The following sections dealing with Critical Theory and Constructivism, then, are more in line with Jackson’s own recommendations, but do not restrict such reflexivity to ‘monist transfactualism,’ thereby acknowledging a greater variability of epistemic-ontological commitments, i.e., different kinds of Reflexivisms, and consequently, the need to consider whether reflexivity cannot in fact be differently categorised – but providing an alternative to Jackson’s categories is beyond the physical and analytical capacity of this paper.

⁶ Compare, for example, Dauphinee’s (2010) and Doty’s (2010) views on the purpose of autoethnography in IR with Inayatullah’s (2011a) and Löwenheim’s (2010).

but one that led to a greater commitment to Positivism rather than to reflexivity as it is understood by its more radical proponents⁷.

These different observations, individually and jointly, should give a sense not only of the variety of conceptions of reflexivity one can find today in the IR literature, but perhaps also of the reasons why the “reflexive turn” seems so familiar as a “turn away from” but at the same time so difficult to identify as a clear “move toward.” A more detailed and exhaustive review of reflexivity in contemporary IR literature is likely to reveal an even greater diversity of positions, or an even greater lack of conceptualisation of what reflexivity entails at the epistemic, ontological, theoretical, and deontological levels of inquiry. Having alerted the reader to the great diversity and lack of consistency that currently characterizes scholarly references to reflexivity in IR, I now turn to a meta-theoretical exercise that focuses, for analytical purposes, on the body of literature wherein reflexivity is more explicitly and consciously conceptualised as a feature of IR theory and research, namely, Critical and Constructivist IR. The purpose of the following sections, then, is to explore a “maximalist” rather than a “minimalist” conceptualisation and praxis of reflexivity, by reflecting on how epistemic, ontological, theoretical *and* deontological reflexivity should be developed to move the discipline beyond the “turn away” from Positivism and “toward” a Reflexivist tradition.

The Hegelian Thread

Although reflexivity becomes an explicit concept of Western social science research in the last three decades of the twentieth century, it finds its roots in nineteenth-century European (Continental) Epistemology, more specifically in the thought of Georg W.F. Hegel (1977[1807]). Against the Anglo-Saxon, Foundationalist Epistemology of the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian theory of knowledge, which rests on the theory of *correspondence* and *representation*, Hegelian thought asserts the

⁷ Behaviorist scholars’ commitment to “value-freedom” was originally grounded in their awareness of the possible influence of bias in political analysis. In this sense, Positivism is the result of a minimalist “reflexivity.” In the case of Behaviorists, this “self-awareness” was translated into a total denial of any self-referential dimension in Positivist scholarship, while in the case of non-Positivist scholars, the same minimalist reflexivity is translated into “self-reference,” of which autobiographical IR is a good illustration.

historicity of knowledge, truth and reason. Deprived of the epistemic certainty associated with the notions of objectivity, representation and truth, post-Hegelian European social thought started moving away from normative discussions of epistemology (i.e., away from the three central “problems” of classical Epistemology, namely, “what are the nature, sources and limits of human knowledge?”), toward historical and sociological analyses of the conditions of the production of knowledge (both in terms of validity and meaning), thereby problematising the relationship between the nature of the social world as we observe it, and the socio-historical conditions that make it appear as a *given* order.

It may be argued that most of post-Positivist schools of thought that currently populate the social sciences, including IR, have branched out from Hegelian thought, attempting different interpretations and resolutions of the main *problematic*s that Hegel identified with respect to the nature, meaning, and validity of historical knowledge. Most accounts of Reflexivity in the social sciences and IR can therefore be traced back to these Hegelian roots (For a detailed account of the reflexive component of different post-positivist theories, see Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000)). But the different epistemic, ontological, and normative premises proposed by different reflexive post-Positivist approaches translate into significantly different projects for IR theory and IR generally. I will focus here on Critical Theory and Constructivism to highlight these important differences, and then show the limits of the “reflexive turn” in both schools of thought.

The Critical-Theoretical View

An obvious development of the Hegelian problematic of historical knowledge is found in Marx and Engels’ Historical Materialism, which, despite its inherently Positivist appraisal of social reality and history, produced a central concept that is at the origin of the *problematic* of reflexivity in contemporary Marxist-inspired thought, namely, the concept of Ideology. Through this concept, Marx and Engels articulated the link between extant representations of reality, and the conditions that make reality appear as a *given objective order*. The notion of Ideology has, however, created an important epistemic and theoretical problem for Marxist scholars, that of defining the relationship between Ideology – understood as a distorted form of consciousness – and Historical Materialism – understood as a superior explanation of

historical development. If all forms of knowledge are ideological manifestations of materialist (socio-economic) structures and relations of conflict and domination, then Historical Materialism itself should be subjected to a Historical Materialist or other type of socio-historical analysis (Mannheim 1936). If, on the other hand, Historical Materialism represents a superior – i.e., “true” – analysis of historical development, then its superiority should be based on some third-order, meta-theoretical or epistemic frame of analysis that is external to it.

The concept of Ideology therefore creates a reflexive problem for Marxist thought – it begs the question of *self-referentiality*. This problem was more explicitly addressed in Frankfurt School Critical Theory, which retained the centrality of Ideology while emancipating it from its underlying Positivist theory of knowledge. From a Critical-Theoretical viewpoint, the solution lies in embracing reflexivity as a core epistemic stance of Critical Theory, which distinguishes itself from Traditional Theory precisely by its acknowledgment of the historicity of knowledge and of the inscription of knowledge in social interests (Horkheimer 1976[1937]; Habermas 1972). These two components lead to two important consequences for Critical Theorists. The first is that Critical Theory necessarily entails a self-referential discourse, or, as Robert Cox put it, an account of its own existence: it is both inside and outside of itself, both subject and object of knowledge. This explains why reflexivity is first identified as a meta-theoretical requirement of social analysis (Neufeld 1993). The second consequence is that Critical Theory is necessarily engaged in a discourse on values, since it acknowledges the inscription of knowledge in social interests:

[Critical theory] seeks to understand society by taking a position outside of society while at the same time recognising that it is itself the product of society. [...] it involves a change in the criteria of theory, the function of theory and its relationship to society. [...]. It is both an intellectual *and* a social act. (Hoffman 1987:233).

Reflexivity, then, is manifested as a cognitive *solution*, rather than a cognitive *problem*. However, the move from the meta-theoretical to the theoretical might explain the adequacy and coherence of Critical Theory, but it does not explain the need for its existence. Within a Positivist frame of understanding, theory is justified by the social value of knowledge and validated by the paradigm of truth-as-

correspondence. There is no need to go beyond the world of facts as long as one believes in the value of *facts in-themselves*. Outside of this Positivist circle, the need to justify the existence of knowledge in the absence of a referential framework of correspondence and representation becomes necessary and problematic – it involves a validation that is external to knowledge itself.

Critical Theory finds this validation in the realm of values and interests, by asserting that meaningful knowledge is that which serves *human emancipation*. Critical Theory therefore moves from the meta-theoretical to the theoretical to the axiological/normative, by setting human emancipation as the objective and underlying legitimacy of theory proper. This was already suggested by Marx's view that the point of Historical Materialism was not merely to describe the world but more importantly to change it. 'The point,' then, of Critical IR theory

is not simply to alter the way we look at the world, but to alter the world. It must offer more than mere description and an account of current affairs. It must also offer us a significant choice, and a critical analysis of the quality and direction of life. (Hoffman 1987:244-5).

Whether grounded in early (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) or late (Habermas) Frankfurt School thought, Critical IR Theory is fundamentally committed to bridging the gap between facts and values, and between sociological and philosophical analysis. Emancipation as an *end* therefore constitutes the link between the cognitive and praxeological aspects of reflexivity: as Critical Theory reveals the underlying processes that contribute to making the world as a historically constituted order, it also reveals the unfulfilled potentialities of historical development. This entails the rejection of the *value-neutral* position adopted by Positivism, in favour of an activist, *engaged* social praxis. Accordingly, 'the question of "what is reliable knowledge?" [is] reformulated as "how should we live?"' (Neufeld 1993:75).

Critical Theory thereby manages to escape the danger of nihilism or perspectivism that it accuses Postmodernism of having succumbed to. It does so by embracing its own historicity. In his anticipation of the *tu quoque* argument that Critical Theory's criticism of Positivism could be (reflexively) turned against it, Robert Cox (1996[1985]:56-7) addresses the 'troublesome question of the ideological nature of thought.' According to him, the question is

troublesome insofar as the imputation of ideology may appear to be insulting to the positivist who draws a line between his science and another's ideology. I should make it clear that I do not draw such a line; I accept that my own thought is grounded in a particular perspective; and I mean no offense in pointing to what appears to be a similar grounding in other people's thought. [...]. The troublesome part comes when some scientific enterprise claims to transcend history and to propound some universally valid form of knowledge. Positivism, by its pretensions to escape from history, runs the greater risk of falling into the trap of unconscious ideology.

The *epistemic* consistency of Critical thought thereby seems to be preserved, on the basis of the *dialectical* relationship between theory and practice, between thought and history: Critical Theory can then be viewed as a socio-intellectual process constantly 'confront[ing] all its statements on the subjective experience, conscious and unconscious, of human beings and human groups, with the objective factors determining their existence' (Adorno, 1976[1957]:250) – and, reflexively, its own as well. As the process actualizes itself by exploring 'historical alternatives' to existing power structures, 'the values attached to the alternatives do become facts when they are translated into reality by historical practice' (Marcuse 2002[1964]:xlii).

At the *normative* level, however, the reflexive gaze confronts Critical Theory to the very ideological roots and content of the notion of "emancipation" it promotes. As was the case with Marx, emancipation is viewed as universal, applying to 'man(kind),' 'society as a whole' (Horkheimer). When translated from the realm of individual (post-industrial) societies to the "global" realm of world politics, the subject of emancipation becomes the 'species' itself (Linklater 1990:8). Given, however, that Critical Theory has been exclusively a Western intellectual product, its call for "emancipation" – and the very content and nature of its emancipatory project – can legitimately be called into question, at least from the perspective of those whom it recognizes as having been or still being "oppressed" or "exploited" by the economic, technological, political and cognitive culture of the "capitalist West." Viewed from without the history of the Western theory of knowledge, with its enclosed narrative that navigates between Greek philosophy, European Enlightenment, and the Postmodern *problematiques* of Western Modernity and disenchantment, on what grounds, then, can Critical Theory claim to *re-present* and *represent* a universal view of human emancipation?

While its dialectical epistemology allows it to manage the reflexive gaze at the cognitive level, situating Critical Theory both *inside* and *outside* its subject-matter, it

does not, however, provide a consistent answer to its normative stance. In Critical Theory's move from epistemology to axiology, part of its reflexive perspective seems to be lost – as if the notion of emancipation were endowed with some sort of greater epistemic certainty than all other objects of (historical) human consciousness.

The Constructivist View

A second, dominant account of reflexivity in IR theory can be traced back to Hegelian thought, but in a significantly different variation on the theme of historical knowledge. I propose to identify its starting point with Karl Mannheim's (1936) choice to operate a translation from the Marxist *theory of ideology* to a proper *sociology of knowledge*. In a sense, Mannheim's cognitive project branches out more coherently from Hegel's epistemology than Marx and Engels', whose assertion that Hegel's idealism needed to be turned back on its feet led to a Positivist detour that only postponed the development of a historicist alternative to the Positivist theory of knowledge. Mannheim confronts the historical, collective knowing subject with the difficulty of simultaneously pursuing the *normative* project of defining the *standards* of knowledge, and the *historical* project of identifying the *conditions* under which knowledge becomes possible and meaningful.

Mannheimian sociology of knowledge was weakened in the Anglo-Saxon world with the rise of Positivism (especially in the U.S.), and the development of Mertonian sociology of science, wherein epistemic relativism could be ignored. With the development of Constructivism, the “social construction of reality” became a central ontological stance of sociology of knowledge, and naturally led to envisioning the epistemic problems associated with the self-referentiality of knowledge that were non-existent within the representational view. The first classical Positivist distinction to suffer from Constructivism was the subject-object dichotomy. If the world as we view it is not merely external to us but constructed by our gaze and practice, then social reality is necessarily reflective of knowledge and vice versa – knowledge and reality become *mutually constitutive epistemically*, and *mutually reflective ontologically*. The *problematique* of Constructivist scholarship thus starts with the acknowledgment of the ‘reification’ of social reality, namely:

the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products [...]. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:89).

Constructivist IR scholars have adopted this common understanding of Constructivism as being first and foremost a different way of understanding the *nature* of reality. They agree, in other words, that Constructivism changes the *ontological* status of social reality by acknowledging its “constructed nature.” All Constructivists, then, attempt to reverse this process of reification: they

aim to “denaturalize” the social world, that is, to empirically discover and reveal how the institutions and practices and identities that people take as natural, given, or matter of fact, are, in fact, the produce of human agency, of social construction. [They] believe that intersubjective reality and meanings are critical data for understanding the social world. [They] insist that all data must be “contextualized”, that is, they must be related to, and situated within, the social environment in which they were gathered, in order to understand their meaning. [They] accept the nexus between power and knowledge, the power of practice in its disciplinary, meaning-producing, mode. [They] also accept the restoration of agency to human individuals. Finally, [they] stress the reflexivity of the self and society, that is, the mutual constitution of actor and structure (Hopf 1998:182).

As far as reflexivity is concerned, however, ‘the mutual constitution of actor and structure’ entails different *problematisques* for Constructivism whether the “actors” in question are merely the social agents (individually and collectively) that constitute IR’s object of study, or whether they *also* include IR scholars (individually and collectively) as one particular group of social agents. This changes significantly the kind of empirical research one is expected – or feels compelled – to pursue within IR.

If Constructivists focus exclusively on the social constructedness of international reality (minus IR scholarship), they are likely to reduce the *problematique* of reflexivity to the social agents they study. A good example is found in Alexander Wendt’s (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*. Wendt starts by identifying the relevance of reflexivity in relation to the “double hermeneutic” that is specific to the social sciences, i.e., as a *problematique* that concerns (scientific) knowledge-producers (1999:76). The concept then disappears from the book and

reappears again when Wendt considers ‘the possibility of collective reflexivity at the international level’ (1999:376):

By highlighting the role our practices play in sustaining social kinds, therefore, constitutive theorizing enhances our collective capacity for critical self-reflection or “reflexivity”. This gives us perspective on our social environment and helps us to overcome any false sense of determinism. It also opens up the possibility of thinking self-consciously about what direction to go in. [...] At the individual level to varying degrees we all think reflexively, and as the example of Soviet New Thinking suggests even states are capable of doing so. The question is this: can the states *system* achieve reflexivity? (Wendt, 1999:375).

As illustrated in this excerpt, reflexivity is coherently defined as ‘self-reflection,’ whether it concerns the observer of social reality or the social agents she observes. The two levels remain, however, *separated*, and reflexivity is here understood as operating at a single level of action/interpretation, namely, knowledge in general. This seems to neutralize the problematisation of reflexivity as resulting from the “double hermeneutic” – the coexistence and convergence of two levels of interpretation (Giddens 1982). Within this perspective, Constructivism’s concern with reflexivity can be reduced and restricted to the realm of IR’s object of study without ever touching upon the epistemic question of the “social construction of knowledge.” In this sense, Constructivists need not be concerned with their own knowledge-production, if the ontological realm can be divided in such a way that different Constructivists can study different aspects of reality, which may or may not include IR scholars themselves. In the latter case, reflexivity itself becomes an *ontological* problem of Constructivism, rather than an *epistemic* principle of Constructivist research. Constructivism’s concern for reflexivity is then actualized by developing empirical research that focuses on the constructed nature of international “facts,” such as anarchy or power, and therefore aims at highlighting the possibility of international actors becoming aware of their participation in the reality they conceive as external to them. This translates practically into the investigation of such fields of international action as diplomacy.

The inclusion of (scientific) knowledge as a level of action that can be objectivated by Constructivism significantly changes the meaning and status of reflexivity within it. Ted Hopf (1998) noted that there are two different kinds of Constructivisms in IR – a ‘conventional’ and a ‘critical’ type, the latter being so

called for its close affiliation with the theoretical and practical concerns of Critical Theory:

critical theorists self-consciously recognize their own participation in the reproduction, constitution, and fixing of the social entities they observe. They realize that the actor and observer can never be separated. Conventional constructivists ignore this injunction, while largely adopting interpretivist understandings of the connectivity of subjects with other subjects in a web of intersubjective meaning. The observer never becomes a subject of the same self-reflective critical inquiry. [...] conventional constructivism does not accept critical theory's ideas about its own role in producing change and maintains a fundamentally different understanding of power. (Hopf 1998:184, 185)

Stefano Guzzini provides a good illustration of 'critical' Constructivism's view of reflexivity. For him, the fact that both knowledge and reality are constructed entails that there are two 'levels of action' that need to be interpreted simultaneously: the level of 'common-sense knowledge' and the level of 'scientific knowledge.' Guzzini considers that 'Constructivists must assume [both] scientific and common-sense knowledge to be socially produced' and therefore they 'need to take seriously that if science is just another form of human action, both theories of knowledge and theories of action have to be understood *in connection*' (Guzzini 2000:162). For Guzzini, then, a 'coherent constructivism must approach them in the same way' (Guzzini 2000:170), which means that reflexivity operates not within each level of action separately, but at their junction, since conceptually and practically it is not possible to separate the processes of knowledge construction from the constructed reality within which knowledge is produced. This view entails that Constructivist scholars should themselves be concerned with the question of 'how [it is] possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities' (Berger and Luckmann 1991[1966:30) *within Constructivism itself*.

These two different understandings of what reflexivity entails for Constructivism lead to another important point, which concerns IR scholarship's ethical and deontological stance, i.e., its position with regards to society and its existing systems of values. The concerns of "critical" Constructivism naturally converge with those of Critical Theory, albeit in a different fashion. As Hopf noted,

critical theory aims at exploding the myths associated with identity formation, whereas conventional constructivists wish to treat those identities as possible causes for action. Critical theory thus claims an interest in change, and a capacity to foster change, that no conventional constructivist could make. (Hopf 1998:184)

On the one hand, some Constructivists have made their position clear with respect to Constructivism's own engagement in social reality. Emanuel Adler, for example, stated that '[a] constructivist "mediative" epistemology⁸ [...] is interested neither in emancipation per se, nor exclusively in uncovering the power structures that affect the marginalized in history, but in providing better explanations of social reality' (Adler 1997:333-4). While he states that 'constructivist theory can be both "critical" and "problem-solving", in Robert Cox's sense' (Adler 1997:334), its "critical aspect" seems to be restricted to its ability to historicise knowledge rather than to also politicise it by producing an account of itself that could turn it into a reflexive agent of change. On the other hand, those Constructivists who seem, like Wendt, to assert the centrality of social change for Constructivism do not feel compelled to include IR in their ontological appraisal of the "construction of" international politics. Constructivism can therefore perfectly continue to exist without ever entailing a discussion of how it contributes to producing a new status quo or of affecting society and human practices – including (institutionalised) knowledge.

The Two Limits of the Reflexive Turn:

Taking Critical Theory and Critical Constructivism as the two most epistemically coherent accounts of reflexivity in contemporary IR literature⁹, a discussion of the limits of reflexivity and the challenges it currently faces becomes more interesting and useful. Two specific points will be addressed here, and I will argue that a resolution of each separately and both together entails the development of an

⁸ Adler defines Constructivists as "mediativists" in the sense used by Steve Woolgar, i.e., as "ontological realists who believe that reality is affected by knowledge and social factors." (Adler 1997:322).

⁹ Pragmatism is also a good candidate for reflexive scholarship, but coherently reflexive Pragmatist IR has not yet emerged as a representative school of thought in the discipline, at least not as Critical Theory and Constructivism currently are.

interdisciplinary research program that rests on a different attitude vis-à-vis epistemology.

From Meta-Theory to Theory to Empiry:

The first problem concerns the translation of reflexivity as an epistemic question into the realm of empirical research, and is particularly acute in the case of Critical reflexive IR, whose position is best exemplified in the work of Mark Neufeld (1991, 1993, 1995), its most articulate proponent. Neufeld writes that

[reflexivity] can be understood to entail three core elements: (i) *self-awareness* regarding underlying premises, (ii) the *recognition* of the inherently politico-normative dimension of paradigms and the normal science tradition they sustain, and (iii) the *affirmation* that reasoned judgements about the merits of contending paradigms are possible in the absence of a neutral observation language. (Neufeld 1993:54-5; emphasis added).

More explicitly,

[r]eflexivity is not a “research programme” designed to provide cumulative knowledge about the world of empirical facts or about the world of theory. [...]. [It] is a meta-theoretical stance involving (i) a *recognition* of the interrelationship of the conception of “facts” and “values” on the one hand, and a community-specific social and political agenda on the other, and (ii) an openness to engage in reasoned dialogue to assess the merits of contending paradigms (Neufeld 1993:60-1; emphasis added).

I have highlighted the terms ‘self-awareness,’ ‘recognition’ and ‘affirmation’ to make more explicit Neufeld’s definition of what reflexivity does and does not entail, and my own take on his position. It is important, first, to refer Neufeld’s stance to the general intellectual context in which reflexivity appears in IR literature, and more specifically, from a Critical-Theoretical viewpoint, to the importance of this notion in addressing the epistemic problem of relativism in IR’s post-positivist era (especially in light of the development of Postmodernism). Neufeld’s stress on ‘the merits of contending paradigms’ and the possibility of producing ‘reasoned judgments’ despite the absence of a ‘neutral observation language’ are to be understood within the context of the discussion of the incommensurability of different IR paradigms and theories. Reflexivity is then viewed as a positive solution to the

problem of the social and philosophical value of knowledge – and truth – against the “anything goes” attitude that threatened to replace the flawed certainty of Positivism with the nihilist perspective of epistemic relativism.

Nonetheless, reflexivity remains, for Neufeld, first and foremost a ‘meta-theoretical stance’ and in this sense is not in itself a ‘research programme.’ This is perfectly fine as a definition of what reflexivity is/is not, but if there is any usefulness to reflexivity *qua* meta-theoretical stance, surely it is in its ability to *produce* a ‘research programme’ of some sort that takes reflexivity as a starting point for the development of empirical knowledge. This is even more important given that Critical Theory is concerned with emancipation, i.e., with social *change* and *development*. Firstly, then, reflexivity cannot be restricted to, or stop at, the mere ‘recognition’ of the ‘interrelationship of the conceptions of “facts” and “values”’ and ‘community-specific social and political agenda[s].’ It cannot be simply about becoming ‘self-aware’ of the ‘politico-normative’ (Neufeld) or ‘ideological’ (Cox) elements that subtend and promote systems of knowledge. It necessarily has to also *inform* a “theory” of the social/international, and therefore lead to the production of a significantly different type of *empirical knowledge*. Secondly, it is not clear what, apart from empirical knowledge itself, can produce or justify such ‘self-awareness,’ ‘recognition’ or ‘affirmation’. Surely, reflexivity itself must *result from* an empirical assessment of how knowledge is subtended by ‘politico-normative’ or ‘ideological’ principles. Reflexivity is therefore necessarily produced by and productive of empirical knowledge.

It appears then necessary for Critical Theory to develop a more consistent understanding of reflexivity that ties the meta-theoretical “reflexive” stance to the theoretical and empirical project of Critical Theory. One way of doing so is to translate reflexivity into a *methodology* for empirical social science. If, for instance, reflexivity entails ‘a recognition of the interrelationship of the conception of “facts” and “values”’ on the one hand, and a community-specific social and political agenda on the other’, this means that this interrelationship should be studied in order to produce theoretical frameworks that can objectivate, in a reflexive way, cognitive discourses in IR in relation to social and political agendas, and these theoretical frameworks can in turn be used to produce a better understanding of how knowledge

is constituted at the international level¹⁰. Reflexivity, then, cannot be viewed as simply an axiomatic point of departure from Positivism, since the nature of the statements produced by our reflexive “recognition” of such and such social realities must themselves be based on an empirical assessment of how they appear to us, how they are produced, and how they can be changed. Therefore, from an internal, Critical-Theoretical perspective, as long as reflexivity remains trapped in the realm of meta-theory, it can neither produce the type of alternative theory that Critical scholars hope to replace Positivism with, nor dynamically inform our historical knowledge of the world and of IR in it. The move from meta-theory to theory to empiry is therefore necessary.

This move entails delving into a set of different sociologies that address all the realms of reality that are implied in the reflexive turn: a sociology of ideology/ideas/values, of knowledge and science, of political and economic systems, and of the relationships among these different realms of social reality. This is needed to both justify the *need* for reflexivity and its *relevance* as an underlying premise of social science research, and to develop a properly reflexive research program that can situate the realm of knowledge/ideas within the realm of praxis and vice-versa. Reflexivity therefore necessarily leads to an inter-disciplinary research programme that stretches the boundaries of IR proper way beyond any of the limits it has historically reached, including during the Behavioralist era.

From Knowledge to Emancipation

Another important problem of reflexive scholarship concerns the inscription of reflexivity in the realm of ethics. This is manifested in two different utterances. The first is the notion of ‘ethical reflexivity’ (Lynch 2008), and the second that of ‘emancipatory theory’ (Neufeld 1995). In both views, the problem is to provide not only a conceptual link between reflexivity as an epistemic stance and the adherence to certain moral values or norms, but also a standard or basis (whether normative or empirical) for developing a specifically normative reflexive discourse.

¹⁰ For an example of how reflexivity can be used as a *methodology* to study the relationship between conceptions of facts/values and socio-political/academic agendas, see Hamati-Ataya (2011a).

The problem of the notion of emancipation has already been mentioned in the case of Critical Theory. It is also predominant within Critical Constructivism, which is concerned with social change and views reflexivity as a means to producing not merely a better social science but also a more moral one – hence the importance of “power” in Critical Constructivist IR literature (Guzzini 2000, 2005). The problem, then, is that within this view reflexivity entails the adherence to a normative standard of emancipation. If reflexivity does not extend to the realm of values, then emancipatory theory falls back into a reversed Positivism, *which denies the social construction of values while asserting the social construction of facts*. The question, then, is first an ontological one, since it rests on a definition of facts/values that is consistent with the production of both a discourse on facts and a discourse on values.

Whether this entails developing ties with value/normative theory or a more anthropological/sociological investigation of human and social systems of values, the task remains the same. Insofar as reflexivity is related not merely to a more sound (historicist) understanding of reality and of its relation to knowledge, but also to a morally meaningful understanding of how knowledge-producers are located in, affected by, and productive of, international structures and relations of power, the ethical and deontological meaning of reflexivity cannot be ignored. In the case of Critical Theory, the problem is obvious because Critical Theory is justified existentially and philosophically by the objective of promoting human emancipation – whatever it means, but it should mean something specific. For Constructivism, the problem may be approached differently whether, as mentioned earlier, IR Constructivists are interested in including themselves as objects of study, or simply restrict reflexivity to the ontological realm of the construction of knowledge/reality from the perspective of international agents. In the latter case, insofar as Constructivism is concerned with the processes whereby values become shared by a group of agents and start to efficiently define their perceptions of the world and their practice in it, it necessarily has to engage in an investigation of how values are formed, how they affect knowledge and praxis, and the conditions and processes that govern their evolution. Whether consciously formulated in terms of “reflexive scholarship” or not, this approach constitutes the bulk of Constructivism’s (and Feminist Constructivism’s) contribution to contemporary empirical research in IR.

It is, then, the first approach that needs to be analytically and empirically developed within Constructivism. For those Constructivists who also include

themselves as social constructs, and for whom therefore reflexivity is intrinsically about self-referentiality, it is necessary to clearly define Constructivism's *social role*. The differences observed among Constructivist IR scholars with respect to their degree of social and moral engagement are common to all forms of Constructivism, which, unlike Critical Theory, is not originally defined *qua* engaged knowledge/praxis. Ian Hacking (1999) questions the extent to which Constructivism is in fact an emancipatory approach to social reality, by noting that although 'the idea of social construction has been wonderfully liberating' because of its explicit discourse on the non-inevitability of social phenomena, 'unfortunately social construction analyses do not always liberate' (1999:2). It is therefore, according to him, important not to just 'ask for the meaning' of Constructivism, but to also 'ask what's the point' of it (1999:5).

Hacking proposes to summarize the Constructivist viewpoint through the following series of statements, where X represents that portion of reality that is said to be "(socially) constructed":

- (0) In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable. (1999:12)
- (1) X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.
- (2) X is quite bad as it is.
- (3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed. (1999:6)

Statement (0) states 'a precondition for a social constructionist thesis about X. Without (0) there is no inclination (aside from bandwagon jumping) to talk about the social construction of X' (1999:12). Once this precondition is set, all Constructivists engage in a type (1) thesis about a specific X. Such theses in IR are at the origin of the emergence of Constructivism, as when Wendt posited that 'anarchy is what states make of it,' and Onuf that the world is 'a world of our making.' Stopping at this stage would correspond to a 'conventional' Constructivism that aims, as Adler put it, for a better type of social explanation – a social theory that understands the socio-historical processes that make the world appear as a given. However, as Hacking notes, 'many social construction theses at once advance to (2) and (3),' although 'they need not do so':

One may realize that something, which seems inevitable in the present state of things, was not inevitable, and yet is not thereby a bad thing. But most people who use the social construction idea enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some X that they dislike in the established order of things (Hacking 1999:6-7).

Depending on how they answer the question “what’s the point” of Constructivism, Constructivist IR scholars will define their relation to society differently. A move beyond statement (0) will therefore produce different ‘grades of commitment.’ Hacking identifies 6 possible attitudes for Constructivists (1999:19-20):

- the ‘Historical’ – X is a historical construct;
- the ‘Ironic’ – X is a historical construct, it’s bad, but there’s not much we can do about it;
- the ‘Reformist’ – X is a historical construct, it’s bad, but we can try to make it less so;
- the ‘Unmasking’ – by showing that X is a historical construct, we make it lose its ‘authority or false appeal’ [this corresponds to Mannheim’s notion of *enthüllung* or the ‘unmasking turn of mind’ – Mannheim (1952[1925]:140];
- the ‘Rebellious’ – X is a historical construct, it’s bad, and we would be much better off without it;
- the ‘Revolutionary’ – X is a historical construct, it’s bad, and we need to change the world in respect of X.

Constructivist IR scholars are often only implicit about their degree of commitment or the social value and purpose of Constructivism. Adler’s position may clearly be translated as a “Historical” type of commitment, while Wendt’s may be located between a “Reformist” or “Unmasking” type. The more Constructivists focus on “power” (Guzzini 2005), the more it is likely that they will move beyond type (1) theses and towards a “Rebellious” or “Revolutionary” form of commitment. Feminist Constructivist scholarship is a clear example of such an explicit move beyond thesis (1) and beyond the “Ironic” or “Unmasking” type of commitment.

With respect to reflexivity, however, this needs to be combined with another important element of Constructivist ontology: the type of X that Constructivists study. Hacking (1999:21-22) identifies three important classes of X: ‘objects’ (people, states/conditions, practices, actions, classes, behaviour), ‘ideas’ (conceptions, beliefs, theories), and what he calls ‘elevator words’ (facts, truth, reality, and knowledge). Depending, then, on the type of X Constructivists focus on, the type of social commitment they espouse will take on a different meaning and will have different

consequences on the type of reflexivity they uphold. But reflexivity seems to entail that X is always about *both* ‘elevator words’ *and* something else in international reality. Constructivists have therefore to make clear what exactly they want to *change*, and what reflexivity entails in terms of social and moral commitment. Whatever it entails, moving beyond type (1) theses requires a definition of what “bad” is, and therefore the reference to a specific axiological or normative standard of assessment.

These questions are not easy to answer. One of the problems of “reflexive scholarship” in IR is that it has from the beginning mixed the epistemic/meta-theoretical understanding of reflexivity with its ethical dimension. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that reflexivity appeared more strongly in the writings of Critical Theorists, for whom “emancipation” is a built-in requirement of post-Positivist IR. The connection is made clear by Neufeld, who asserts that reflexive theory *is* emancipatory (Neufeld 1995). Within Constructivism, this link is less explicit, and therefore the confusion between the two dimensions of reflexivity is made greater – especially when reflexivity is used to address “objects” that are already politicised, such as gender or identity. It is, then, not surprising that Feminist IR scholars are particularly explicit about reflexively interrogating their own “viewpoint” on the world, but, as Patrick Thaddeus Jackson notes (2011: 185-6), they yet have to show what *methodology* they (have) use(d) to do so.

A “maximalist” commitment to reflexivity requires that the epistemic and ethical/deontological levels be coherently articulated. The combination of epistemic and ethical reflexivity therefore entails the development of a more systematic and explicit understanding (theoretically and empirically) of the relation between *the realm of facts* and *the realm of values*. As mentioned earlier, one cannot move to the “social construction of facts” while assuming a universal understanding of values: the deconstruction that is implied in both Critical Theory and Constructivism requires that values be subjected to a historical analysis of their emergence, meaning, and impact on social reality. Reflexivity then entails being capable of producing a consistent account of values, an account that can serve as a basis for justifying the social value, meaning, and objective of scholarly engagement. Only under such conditions can reflexivity also prevent scholarship from falling into a non-critical practice of social engagement – the values of reflexive scholarship need to be assessed just as much as those of the agents IR scholars study.

Interdisciplinarity from a Reflexivist Perspective:

Both the move from meta-theory to theory to empiry and the move from epistemic to ethical concerns entail a significant re-organization of the relationship between IR and the other social sciences – as well as the pure sciences. I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive map of the inter-connections between IR as we know it today and all the existing sciences, but will rather focus on some specific disciplines that are important to open up to within the *problematique* of reflexivity.

IR and the Social Sciences

The first obvious field of inquiry that reflexive scholars should become engaged in is the sociology of knowledge and science in general, and the sociology of IR in particular. Insofar as reflexivity entails becoming aware of the social processes that subtend the production of knowledge and how this knowledge in turn is reflected in the practices, beliefs, and commitments of social agents (including IR scholars), nothing can be said from within IR's own *doxa*. A truly reflexive research programme and curriculum should begin with asserting the centrality of the sociology of knowledge/science for IR. Just as the "Behavioural turn" was intrinsically inclined to rely on the philosophy of knowledge/science literature to counter its Classical Realist predecessor, so is the "reflexive turn" naturally reliant on the corpus of the sociology of knowledge/science to counter its Positivist counterpart. The point is also to develop a significant research programme that produces knowledge about IR knowledge, and not merely imports findings from other disciplines – this is necessary if one is to move beyond the "reflexive turn" as a "turn" and into a "reflexive era" proper.

The Sociology of IR has significantly developed in the past two decades, especially in relation to the discipline's "American" or "Western" identity, which has made it particularly relevant to Feminist, Constructivist, and Post-Colonial IR scholars, as manifested in the first volume of the "Worlding Beyond the West" Routledge series, edited by Arlene Tickner and Ole Waever (2009). The IR literature now includes studies of the patterns of disciplinary reproduction (including the reproduction of its internal divisions and parochialism), through IR scholars' research and teaching practices and dispositions, which constitutes an important contribution to their own *self-understanding*. However, one should also mention that some

sociologies of IR might be more akin to the Reflexivist project (as a “maximalist” commitment to reflexivity) than others. For example, it makes a great difference whether one studies the discipline within a strictly “Sociology of Science” approach, say à la Randall Collins, within a broader Mannheimian “Sociology of Knowledge” or through a Bourdieusian, general “theory of practice.” *Debating the foundations* of the Sociology of IR should therefore also become an important concern for reflexive scholarship.

A second obvious field of inquiry for reflexive scholars is the sociology of values and norms. And this does not entail simply a study of how values and norms are produced in the international realm, how they affect international relations and state behaviour, or how they could be changed. It also entails understanding the values and norms that govern IR research itself, so as to translate reflexivity into an empirically grounded account of how reflexive scholars are located and involved in the production of meaning about international politics, and how their own accounts are subtended by the specific position they occupy in the domestic, cultural, socio-economic and international settings they operate from¹¹.

Reflexivity also entails reversing the separation between the political and the international, which has been successfully imposed by mainstream (Neorealist) IR. To objectivate the social processes that subtend the production of knowledge, IR scholars need to understand that the way they look at the world and the way they produce science (and the normative system of meanings and standards that legitimate it or make it possible) are dependent on their inscription in specific social settings, whether national, sub-national or trans-national, wherein institutional, ideational, socio-economic and ideological factors operate in a complex way. If the history and sociology of science can provide us with the means to objectivate the way these factors have affected the emergence of specific concepts, modes of theorizing, and methodologies throughout history, as well as their extant social value and meaning, then one cannot remain oblivious to how these same factors shape our current knowledge. Without a return to social and political theory beyond the current rigid disciplinary boundaries of “IR,” reflexivity remains an empty claim that can neither be translated into concrete, self-referential statements about the knowledge we produce, nor be validated by external observers or future generations of scholars.

¹¹ Hence the importance of debating what different sociologies of IR can offer reflexive scholarship.

These three fields of inquiry are of course interrelated, and from the perspective of reflexive scholarship, the type of inter-disciplinarity that they define may be redefined as a form of intra-disciplinarity. However one may want to identify them, reflexivity requires that they also be derived from a Reflexivist philosophy/theory of knowledge.

A Return to the Natural Sciences?

IR has had quite a fluctuating relationship with Epistemology (as a discipline) and with epistemology as the realm of inquiry concerned with the nature and standards of knowledge and truth. In the Behavioural era, epistemology and the philosophy of science replaced political philosophy as the central corpus of IR theory, as an attempt to establish the foundations for “scientific” theorizing within IR. The post-Positivist critique of mainstream IR has also been concerned with epistemology, but found its cues in the “death-of-epistemology” movement that was best manifested in works such as Rorty’s (1979) critique of the correspondence-theory-of-truth. Divorced from the more normative concerns of classical Epistemology, post-Positivism opened IR to the problem of epistemic and theoretical incommensurability, which Postmodernists are quite comfortable with, but which led other post-Positivists to claim the need to ‘devise new roads to commensurability’ (Lapid 1989:249). This explains why reflexivity, which is quite non-existent within Postmodernism, often includes some rejection of the “anything goes” attitude of epistemic relativism (e.g., Neufeld 1993, 1995). If the value of truth is to be preserved, and if truth indeed still means anything at all outside of a Positivist frame of reference, then reflexivity itself can only be meaningful if there is a value in looking back at one’s modes of theorizing, and of comparing them to others. It also means that claims to “truth” – whatever that means in a post-Positivist perspective – can be validated somehow, especially claims made by different post-Positivisms.

But epistemic discussions have led IR to a certain dead-end, as Friedrich Kratochwil (2007) argues, and this has undoubtedly weakened post-Positivism against the perhaps more flawed, but nonetheless more consistent, system of meaning and validation offered by Positivism. I would like to argue that this problem is related to IR scholars’ focus on the incommensurability problem as an internal, normative question of classical Epistemology. The post-Positivist “turn” was not accompanied

by a more radical move away from *normative* epistemology, and remained trapped in the logic of comparing paradigms, theories and approaches on the basis of an (un)achievable common *standard of assessment*. Is the alternative to Positivist epistemology, then, the abandonment of all epistemic discussions? Certainly not. Perhaps only nihilist, or totally relativistic approaches can afford such a position, and only if they situate themselves outside of “social science” per se. The alternative is rather in a combination of Naturalized and Social Epistemology.

Social Epistemology is a *normative* study of the social dimensions of knowledge. Its central question is ‘whether, and to what extent, the conditions of knowledge include social conditions’ (Schmitt 1999:354). While its object of study sets it apart from the empirical investigations of the sociology of knowledge, Social Epistemology is a necessary complement of the latter, and can provide Reflexivist scholarship with a better understanding of how to focus its discussions on the nature and validity of knowledge, and with some guidelines for deciding *when* to resort to *sociological* analyses of knowledge-production/products and *when* to appeal to *epistemic-normative* analyses.

Further away from normative Epistemology, and more interesting for post-Positivist IR is Naturalized Epistemology (Quine 1969), which considers that Epistemology’s objective should be to understand how human beings actually arrive at beliefs about the real world, rather than to determine the normative standards of knowledge. Naturalized Epistemology is interesting for the social sciences because it shifts the classical problems of Epistemology from Philosophy understood in the Kantian sense of the ‘tribunal of pure reason’ (Rorty 1979), to the empirical, experimental problems of cognitive Psychology. Insofar as reflexivity entails an understanding of how one’s own knowledge is produced, and how one can maintain a certain standard of “truth” and validity as opposed to the “common knowledge” of the social agents one observes, then reflexive scholarship should be interested in grounding its epistemic frame of analysis in an understanding of the socio-psychological and socio-physiological processes that make knowledge possible and that constitute (individual, as well as shared) beliefs.

The problem, however, is that post-Positivist IR scholarship has characteristically been opposed to an engagement with the natural sciences – a more or less conscious attempt to reverse the ‘worshipful relationship’ Positivism had established with them (Lapid 1989:246). It is therefore worth asking whether

reflexivity, which is a properly post- or anti-Positivist stance, necessarily entails such a divorce with the empirical sciences. After all, even the most radical Constructivists deny “universal constructionism” – the notion that it is “ideas all the way down.” Some aspects of social reality are not socially constructed, or at least not exclusively. And the very notion of a “double hermeneutic” was supposed to highlight the difference between the social and the natural sciences, which preserves in the mind of many social scientists the value/validity of the kind knowledge produced by the pure, empirical sciences. The point should now be to understand how these two realms are *interconnected*. Sociologists of science have already successfully determined that, unlike Mannheim’s original idea, the natural sciences were not completely immune to social processes – which made possible such investigations as a “sociology of Mathematics,” along with the more general affirmation of the ‘social construction of scientific facts’ (Latour and Woolgar 1979). Cognitive scientists also investigate the part natural (physiological) and social (cultural) factors play in the development of human cognition, and this cannot reasonably be said to be irrelevant to reflexive scholarship. It is therefore time to acknowledge that a denial of Positivism’s epistemic stance does not entail divorcing the “hermeneutic” sciences from all other forms of knowledge. This would indeed be quite a ridiculous intellectual position. It would jeopardize Reflexivism’s ability to generate new knowledge and to sustain itself on the long term as a dynamic research programme capable of cognitive growth.

Conclusion:

Reflexivity After the Reflexive Turn

It may be useful to end this paper as it started, with Lapid’s 1989 article on IR’s “third debate,” and his early assessment of the dangers that faced post-Positivist IR on the long run. One of his concerns was that ‘the post-positivist “liberation of theory from data” could [...] lead us “into the dead end of metatheory”’ (Lapid 1989:249). One of the arguments presented in this paper is that the “reflexive turn” has indeed suffered from this entrapment of reflexivity within the realm of meta-theory, and that it is now necessary to translate reflexivity into a tradition that can produce an empirical, albeit non-Positivist, knowledge of world politics.

Once we get past the terminological diversity and confusion that surrounds the literature of “reflexive scholarship,” the “reflexive turn” indeed should materialize

into a clear research programme that is founded on a consistent and coherent cognitive system, wherein epistemic/ontological, theoretical, methodological, empirical, but also ethical and deontological stances derive from a common, Reflexivist approach to knowledge and social reality. The advantage of using the term “Reflexivism” to label such a programme is that it refers, more clearly than does the generic term “post-Positivism,” to the epistemic and ontological parameters that result from the adoption of reflexivity as a specific cognitive doctrine. Within this Reflexivist approach, which is capable of responding point by point to Positivism, a great variety of theories can be envisaged. It is up to each of them individually to define their specific objects of study, their position vis-à-vis human values and political agendas, and their inclusion or not of an emancipatory project. The point is that within Reflexivism, these choices should be consistent with reflexivity as an underlying premise.

It is, then, possible to take the “reflexive turn” seriously and to “take” it *tout court*, but this entails moving *to* the realm of both facts and values, and doing so *from* a Reflexivist theory of knowledge that can produce empirical accounts of what it means for IR scholars to be inside and outside of their object, what it means for reflexive IR to produce a discourse on world politics, and why reflexivity itself is worth discussing and undertaking both in cognitive and moral terms.

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